Chapter 5: On the Face of It

Exercise 5.1 — Reading with Insight

Q1 What is it that draws Derry towards Mr Lamb inspite of himself?

SOLUTION

Derry is initially reluctant and suspicious of Mr Lamb, yet something about the old man keeps drawing him back. Mr Lamb is the first person Derry has ever met who does not pity him, recoil from his disfigured face, or treat him as a pitiable object. He speaks to Derry simply and directly, as one ordinary person to another.

Mr Lamb's garden itself is a haven that Derry finds irresistible — open-gated, full of life (weeds, crab-apple trees, bees, sunflowers), and completely unhurried. The old man's philosophy — that weeds and flowers are equally alive, that everything in the world is worth looking at, that a person is not defined by a disability — is unlike anything Derry has heard before. When Derry tells his mother, he says Mr Lamb says 'things that matter. Things nobody else has ever said.'

Above all, Mr Lamb does not shut Derry out. He keeps his gate always open, tells Derry he is welcome, calls him a friend without demanding credentials, and challenges him to look outward at the world rather than inward at his own wound. This combination — genuine acceptance, intellectual stimulation, and the absence of false pity — makes the garden feel like a place where Derry can simply exist. Despite his defences, Derry realises he cannot stay away, declaring as he runs off, 'I came back. Lamey-Lamb. I did come back.'

Answer: Mr Lamb's unconditional acceptance, refusal to pity Derry, and life-affirming philosophy draw Derry to him — offering the boy, for the first time, a sense of belonging without shame.

Q2 In which section of the play does Mr Lamb display signs of loneliness and disappointment? What are the ways in which Mr Lamb tries to overcome these feelings?

SOLUTION

Mr Lamb's loneliness and disappointment surface most clearly at the close of Scene One, after Derry has run away promising to return. Left alone in the garden, Mr Lamb speaks to his bees and says: 'I'll come back. They never do, though. Not them. Never do come back.' This aside reveals the habitual disappointment of a man whose open-door generosity has repeatedly gone unrequited — visitors come, but they do not stay, and those who promise to return seldom do.

To overcome these feelings, Mr Lamb has cultivated several deliberate habits. He keeps his garden gate always open and welcomes anyone who enters — children who come to scrump apples, people who sit by his fire in winter, those who accept toffee made with honey. He fills his house with books, sits in the sun, and attends to his bees, finding meaning and companionship in the natural world. He describes hearing his bees not merely 'buzz' but 'sing', showing how he transforms solitude into richness through patient attention.

Crucially, Mr Lamb refuses to shut himself off emotionally. He does not use curtains —

physically or metaphorically — preferring 'the light and the darkness, and the windows open, to hear the wind.' His philosophy of universal interest ('There's nothing God made that doesn't interest me') sustains him when human company fails. He chooses engagement over withdrawal, exactly the choice he urges Derry to make.

Answer: Mr Lamb's loneliness is revealed in Scene One's closing monologue after Derry leaves. He overcomes it by keeping an open garden, nurturing bees and plants, welcoming all visitors, and maintaining a philosophy of finding wonder in the natural world.

Q3 The actual pain or inconvenience caused by a physical impairment is often much less than the sense of alienation felt by the person with disabilities. What is the kind of behaviour that the person expects from others?

SOLUTION

The play dramatises this truth through Derry's experience. His acid-burned face causes no ongoing physical suffering, yet the social wound is acute. People stare, whisper cruel things (a woman at a bus-stop says 'That's a face only a mother could love'), treat him with exaggerated pity or concealed fear, and speak about him in worried tones when they think he cannot hear. Derry has internalised these reactions so deeply that he is afraid of his own reflection.

What a person with a disability expects — and what Derry craves — is straightforward, unsentimental equality. He does not want to be treated as a special case, a pitiable object, or a source of discomfort. He wants others to see the whole person, not just the impairment. He wants people to speak to him directly rather than change the subject, to neither over-explain nor patronise, and above all, not to pretend that his face is invisible while secretly being repelled by it.

Mr Lamb embodies this ideal behaviour. He acknowledges Derry's face matter-of-factly ('I should say, to look at it, you got burned in a fire'), moves on without dwelling on it, and thereafter treats Derry as an intelligent companion capable of making his own choices. He neither pities nor avoids. He challenges Derry to think, to listen, and to engage with the world — the same engagement he demands of himself despite his tin leg. This is the behaviour that genuinely helps: honest acknowledgement, followed by ordinary human respect.

Answer: A person with a disability expects honest acknowledgement of the impairment, freedom from pity or exaggerated fear, and thereafter to be treated as a full, capable human being — exactly what Mr Lamb offers Derry.

Q4 Will Derry get back to his old seclusion or will Mr Lamb's brief association effect a change in the kind of life he will lead in the future?

SOLUTION

Though the play ends with Mr Lamb dead and Derry weeping beside him, there are strong indications that Derry will not retreat into his former seclusion. The most telling evidence is the act of returning itself: against his mother's explicit prohibition, across three miles of fields, Derry comes back to Mr Lamb's garden. He shouts, 'You see, you see! I came back. You said I wouldn't and they said... but I came back.' This return demonstrates a decisive break — for the first time, Derry has defied both external authority and his own self-protective instinct.

Before leaving in Scene Two, Derry tells his mother: 'If I don't go back there, I'll never go anywhere in this world again.' The garden and Mr Lamb have become, for him, a test case for whether he can engage with the world at all. Having passed that test — by coming back — Derry has proved something to himself that cannot be unproved by the old man's death.

Mr Lamb's words, too, are likely to stay with Derry: that hatred burns a person away inside far more than any acid; that locking oneself in a room to avoid the world solves nothing; that the world has 'a whole face' and is 'there to be looked at.' Derry has absorbed these ideas and, in his final moments of weeping, he is not defeated but grieving — a far more connected emotional state than the sullen withdrawal he showed at the play's opening. His future will likely be shaped by the courage Mr Lamb awakened in him.

Answer: Derry's defiant return to Mr Lamb's garden — against all opposition — signals that the brief association has permanently shifted him away from seclusion; he has proved to himself that he can choose engagement over withdrawal.